Book Review/ Compte rendu

Robert Lacroix and Louis Maheu, *Leading Research Universities in a Competitive World*. Translated by Paul Klassen. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. $49.95 (978-0-7735-4477-2).

The title, *Leading Research Universities in a Competitive World* is ambiguous. To me, the phrase "leading research universities" suggested a focus on the strategies and experiences of individuals who lead universities. I soon realized that the title refers to research universities that lead others. Here "leading" refers to holding a top spot in university rankings, and the "competitive world" is constituted by the same. While the book describes the composition of university leadership in the countries it examines, the book is not about leadershi Rather, the authors aim to explain why certian countries dominate rankings of "world-class universities". Lacroix (professor of economics at Université de Montréal) and Maheu (emeritus professor of sociology from Université de Montréal), make use of statistics (e.g., GDP per capita; Gross domestic expenditure on research and development; percent population with a university degree) in order to explain the distribution of high-ranking universities across the globe. If you aren't a numerical thinker, don't worry, the statistics are basic and the authors write accessibly. On the other hand, if you are a serious stats buff you may be disappointed. The authors write for an academic audience, yet this book will have something for most readers interested in university systems and rankings as it provides a perspective that has not been examined in detail. To date, most studies of rankings have critiqued research methods, examined how administrators cope with pressure to perform well, or have documented stakeholder's opinions. I had interest in the authors' articulation of how investment in research and higher education relate to rankings, but I found myself particularly engaged with the history of the research university and university systems in each country. It seemed that history provides greater explanatory power than statistics—at least based on analyses within this book—but I return to this below.

Lacroix and Maheu's first two chapters trace the history of the research university as a particular kind of institution—one approach toward organizing higher education among many (e.g., liberal arts

colleges, or reseearch institutes). Similarly, they describe how rankings transformed over time from a technique used within universities for purposes of peer assessment to one increasingly used by external agencies. This history has been published elsewhere, but interested individuals would have to assemble it in a piecemeal fashion from books and articles scattered across libraries and databases. The fact that rankings originated within universities is important yet often forgotten or altogether ignored in conversations on rankings. Chapter 3 examines the international distribution of universities in relation to macreconomic indicators, concluding with a number of hypotheses regarding the proportion of top ranked universities we should observe in each country based on their economic measures. Chapters 4 through 7 examine the history of university systems for the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and France while describing the ranking performance of each in relation to their economies. Each chapter attempts to understand the degree to which each country meets Lacroix and Maheu's expectations for ranking performance based on their hypotheses. In Chapter 8 the authors attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between their hypotheses and what they observe in each country. Chapter 9 concludes with reflections on the future for universities and policy setting governments that shape contexts in which universities operate.

The authors analyses hinge on two points. First, they are interested in universities that meet the Carnegie Foundation's definition of a research university. Such universities have an array of undergraduate studies, a greater weight of teaching focused at upper graduate levels, a minimum number of PhDs awarded in any given year, and they undertake a large amount of basic research as measured by the magnitude of grants their professors receive (8). The second point of importance is that Lacroix and Maheu make use of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in order to identify "world-class universities" across the globe and to assess how each country performs at placing universities into each list. This approach overlooks a crucial fact that the authors themselves identify: The research university is a particular type of institution that emerged at a specific time and place. While the university exists in many forms, THE and ARWU hold a particular type of research university as the standard against which all other universities are measured regardless of history, their stated goals or functions. Whereas the PhD-granting, research focused university emerged in the United States in the 19th century, this model emerged at different times and to varying degrees in each of the other

countries considered by the authors. In the first decade of the 20th century rankings agencies identified the American model as important and used that model to develop measurements of performance. As such, university rankings are made to measure the degree to which universities—and if only through implication, the political-economic systems that shape them—meet expectations of a particular model.

Lacroix and Maheu identify France as the only country underperforming in the rankings. As I read that chapter what stood out more than anything is that France's higher education system is the most incongruent with the particular form of organization that rankings aim to measure. Why is it that the United States has a large number of universities in rankings and France does not? Because rankings were made to assess the degree to which other universities fit the American model. The authors never point out this fact, but they do clarify characteristics of universities and systems that lead to ranking success. Universities do not operate in isolation and the political and economic forces within their country's borders will have considerable effects on ranking performance. For Lacroix and Maheu the most important characteristic of successful university systems is autonomous governance that allows strategic goal setting and freedom for effective competition on the market for talent and research funds.

The primary lesson from this book—for those interested in climbing rankings—is that no university can rise in the ranks independently; rather, universities will have to work closely with national and regional governments for even a chance at becoming a leading research university. Interestingly, Lacroix and Maheu seem to assume that this objective is a good thing, both for universities and the countries in which they operate. It is undeniable that research in the pursuit of knowledge, scientific, and technological development can benefit economies and society, but the pursuit of rankings is problematic in that it creates competition rather than cooperation and can lead pressured university administrators and professors to engage in unethical or morally questionable activities in order to rank well. The authors do not engage with the growing body of research that describes these problems.

Leading Research Universities in a Competitive World will interest university administrators, government policy makers, and students of education. However, I caution readers not to presume that rankings are valid, useful, or good assessments of university performance, or as an objective in themselves. That mistake could be easily made if one were to rely solely on this book to learn about rankings. Supplementary reading will be necessary for a more critical understanding

of their uses, misuses, and limitations. Luckily, rankings are controversial and you can find many critiques with a simple web search.

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